

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks Following a Briefing on the Oil Spill in the Gulf of Mexico and an Exchange With Reporters in New Orleans, Louisiana

June 4, 2010

The President. Well, I want to thank everybody who participated in this meeting. Most of the folks here were in the meeting that we had last week. One of the encouraging signs is that, at least with respect to Louisiana, it seems that we've made some progress.

The most obvious area of progress was, coming out of the meeting last week, trying to bridge what seemed to be differences with respect to the berm, the barrier islands that Governor Jindal had proposed, and we now have that authority, and dredging is beginning. And now we want to make sure that BP is paying up, but it seems like we're making progress on that front.

I know that a lot of the press may be curious about what's happening in terms of the attempts to cap the well. I don't want to go into the technical details here. I'd prefer Thad to give an update when he has had a chance to talk directly with command and control about what's happening there. But it does appear that the cap, at least for now, is holding, that some hydrocarbons are being sent up to the surface, and that they are slowly ratcheting up the amount of oil and gas that's being extracted. They're doing it carefully so that they don't dislodge or disrupt the cap in some fashion.

We will know more over the next 24 to 48 hours. And it is way too early to be optimistic. But we're just going to keep on monitoring it, and Thad will give you a more thorough briefing when he knows more.

We spent a lot of time here just talking about the logistics of the response on the shore as oil begins to come in. And everybody here has particular concerns because we've got limited resources. We're trying to get more boom, for example, into the places that are needed. We deployed initially a lot of boom here in Louisiana. That meant that some in Alabama wasn't where it was supposed to be. Governor Riley has been appropriately concerned—that's a mild way of putting it—about what's being done with respect to Alabama plans. And what I told him was, is that Thad Allen will be meeting with him individually with respect to the Alabama plan, and if he's not satisfied with the answers that are given over the course of this weekend, then he's going to call me and we're going to meet and sort this out.

Here in Louisiana, where the oil has hit most rapidly, there are still areas where, for example, the mayor here was talking to fishermen; they want to try to build up some barriers to estuaries and areas that are particularly vulnerable. Thad Allen is going to be following up with each of the parish presidents in terms of figuring out what's going on.

One of the things that we've done to make sure that organizationally things are working the way they should is we now have a Coast Guard official who is stationed with each parish president and we actually have a BP representative who is stationed with each parish president so that they have direct access to making sure that any information, any problems that they've got are immediately being shot up to Thad and he can respond quickly. And we want to set that up not just in Louisiana, but that's true in Alabama as well as in Florida. We want county equivalents to have that same kind of representation and rapid response.

We also talked about claims. And this is an area where I think everybody has a lot of concerns. My understanding is, is that BP has contracted for \$50 million worth of TV advertising to manage their image during the course of this disaster. In addition, there are reports that BP will be paying \$10.5 billion—that's billion with a "b"—in dividend payments this quarter.

Now, I don't have a problem with BP fulfilling its legal obligations. But I want BP to be very clear, they've got moral and legal obligations here in the Gulf for the damage that has been done. And what I don't want to hear is, when they're spending that kind of money on their shareholders and spending that kind of money on TV advertising, that they're nickel-and-diming fishermen or small businesses here in the Gulf who are having a hard time.

Now, we've assigned Federal folks to look over BP's shoulder and to work with State and local officials to make sure that claims are being processed quickly, fairly, and that BP is not lawyering up, essentially, when it comes to these claims.

They say they want to make it right. That's part of their advertising campaign. Well, we want them to make it right. And what that means is that if a fisherman got a \$5,000 check, and the next time he goes in, because it's a new month, suddenly BP is saying, well, we need some documentation and this may take 6 months to process or 60 days to process or 30 days to process, for that matter, that fisherman, with all his money tied up in that boat, just may not be able to hang on for another 30 days. He may lose his boat and his livelihood.

We've heard from one of the parish presidents about a shrimp processing plant. They've got a bunch of shrimp on ice so they're selling inventory, but they're not bringing any new product in. And BP says to them, well, you know what, your sales don't seem to have declined. And they try to explain, yes, but we've had to lay off all our workers because we're not bringing any new shrimp in and our cupboards are going to be bare in the next several weeks. BP has got to be able to anticipate that.

So the key point I'm making here is this has been a disaster for this region, and people are understandably frightened and concerned about what the next few months and the new few years may hold. I have, absolutely, confidence about the resilience of this area long term, but if we can make sure that BP is doing the right thing on the front end, it's going to make it an awful lot easier for us to fully recover on the back end. And by the way, it may end up being cheaper for BP.

And so Thad, who's interacting with BP on a regular basis, I think is emphasizing this. My administration is emphasizing it. I want them to hear directly from me and I want the public to hear from me: They need to make sure that they are following through on these claims in a expeditious, fair way. And if they're not, then we are going to stay on them about it.

We've already submitted one bill, and they haven't said that they're not paying it, so I don't want to anticipate problems. But we are already starting to see at the local level folks experiencing problems. And we don't want those problems to build up; we want to nip that at the bud right now.

And the fact that BP can pay a \$10.5 billion dividend payment is indicative of how much money these folks have been making. And given the fact that they didn't fully account for the risks, I don't want somebody else bearing the costs of those risks that they took. I want to make sure that they're paying for it. All right?

The last point I wanted to make is we did talk about what the environmental quality is down here right now. Lisa Jackson has been down here all week, and she went all across the country—or all across the State of Louisiana. She's going to be monitoring what's going on in Alabama and Florida as well.

So far, the air quality, water quality is continually being tested and doesn't seem to be much elevated above normal levels. But I want to emphasize something that she just told us, and that is, people who are onsite involved in cleanup, they have to be mindful of the fact that we're dealing with toxins here. This could be—this could make people very sick if they're not careful. They've got to get the appropriate training. They need the appropriate equipment. If they get sick, we now have health centers that are stationed at each of these points.

Lisa, do you want to talk about that briefly?

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa P. Jackson. Yes, sir. We have health and safety officers and stations at each muster point. So if someone does come back in and feels in any way that they've been exposed, or even if they just don't feel well, the first thing to do is to report it, sir, so that we have a record of it, we can track it down, and we can ensure that they're not in any way penalized for reporting and making sure that they put their health and the health of their family first.

The President. Okay. Again, I want to just emphasize, everybody down here—every local official, every State official—is working as hard as they can. Our Federal teams are working as hard as they can. There are still going to be glitches in the response. There are still going to be arguments and disagreements between local and State, State and Federal, between everybody and BP, between States and States in terms of how we're allocating some of these resources. But I think that Thad Allen has committed to me and the people of the Gulf that we're going to cut through any bureaucratic redtape, any problems that we've got, and we will fix problems that have been identified.

And that was the commitment I made last week. Some of the problems have been fixed; some new ones have resurfaced. We'll fix those too. And we'll keep on coming back until we have dealt with an unprecedented crisis.

But I'm very thankful to everybody for the constructive meeting and the constructive approach that I think everybody is taking in terms of solving this problem.

All right. Thank you, everybody.

Moratorium on Offshore Oil Drilling

Q. Mr. President, what did you say to the parish presidents about the difficulty—the economic difficulties from the drilling moratorium?

The President. We had a conversation about that as well, and what I told them is very simple. When I made the decision to issue the moratorium, we knew that that would have an economic impact. But what I also knew is, is that there was no way that we can go about business as usual when we've discovered that companies like BP, who had provided assurances that they had fail-safe, backup, redundant systems, in fact, not only didn't have fail-safe systems but had no idea what to do when those fail-safe systems broke down.

Now, I announced this week that Bob Graham and Bill Reilly, two respected individuals who have experience both on the environmental side as well as in the energy sector, are going to be examining over the next 6 months what went wrong, but more important, forward

looking, how do we, in fact, increase domestic oil production without seeing the kinds of disasters that we are all witnessing on television day in, day out.

I think Governor Jindal, I know other parish presidents, expressed concern about the immediate economic impact. And what I said to them is the same thing I said to Graham and Reilly, which is, if they can front-load some of the analysis of what went wrong and how you would solve what has happened and what can happen, and you can do that more quickly than 6 months, then let me know. Don't hold the results of your review for 6 months and then tell me. Tell me when you find out.

But what I told the folks in this room was I'm not going to cut corners on it, and I'm not going to press them to move faster than it would take to do an accurate, independent job based on sound science, because I do not want to see this thing repeated again. And the American people don't, and I promise you the people of the Gulf don't want to see it either.

And as difficult as it may be, it's important for us to do this right, because if we don't do it right, then what you could end up seeing is an even worse impact on the oil industry down here, which is so important to so many jobs.

And I think everybody here emphasized—and I want to be clear—I didn't hear anybody here saying that they want unsafe operations on these rigs, and they certainly don't want to see a repeat of this disaster. They did ask, "Can we do it faster?" And what I said to them was the same thing that I said to Graham and Reilly, which is, you do it as fast as it takes to do it right.

All right? Thank you, everybody.

British Petroleum Dividend Payments

Q. Do you want BP to pay that dividend? Are you calling on them not to?

The President. Thank you, guys.

I want to make sure that they are paying the folks in Louisiana for the havoc that they've wreaked, and the folks in Alabama and the folks in Florida. I don't want them nickel-and-diming people down here. I want them to abide by their obligations to their shareholders; I want them to abide by the obligations to the people down here as well.

All right. Thank you, folks.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:29 p.m. at Louis Armstrong International Airport. In his remarks, he referred to Gov. Piyush "Bobby" Jindal of Louisiana; Adm. Thad W. Allen, USCG, in his capacity as national incident commander for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill; Gov. Robert R. Riley of Alabama; Mayor Mitchell J. Landrieu of New Orleans, LA; and D. Robert Graham and William K. Reilly, Cochairs, National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling.

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